

DEVELOPING OUR SOCIALIST SOCIETIES

Socialist societies have been at the heart of the Labour Party since its creation but only one of the socialist societies who were involved in founding the Labour Party survives – the Fabian Society. They are a diverse range of organisations and very different in size and interests including the National Union of Labour Clubs, BAME Labour, Chinese for Labour, Christians on the Left, Disability Labour, the Fabian Society, the Jewish Labour Movement, the Labour Animal Welfare Society, Labour Business, Labour Campaign for International Development, LGBT Labour, Labour Housing Group, Labour Movement for Europe, Labour Party Irish Society, Labour Students, Labour Women’s Network, Scientists for Labour, Socialist Environment and Resources Association (SERA), Socialist Education Association (SEA), Socialist Health Association (SHA) and the Society of Labour Lawyers.

To become an affiliated socialist society an organisation needs to provide its constitution, audited accounts for the last three years and accept the programmes, policy and principles of the Labour Party. They must have been in existence for at least three years and normally for five years. It must be a national membership organisation and its work should cover a broad area of policy or activity of substantial interest to the Party. They will normally have at least 500 members or a plan to build to 500 members or an appropriate proportion of eligible members.

Socialist societies who affiliate to Labour and are involved in our structures report a significant increase in their membership over recent years. Socialist societies have also provided a path into the wider Party for many members.

With the exceptions of Labour Students and BAME Labour who are discussed elsewhere in this report, there are ten socialist societies who currently affiliate 500 or more members and nine socialist societies who affiliate fewer than 500 members. They collectively affiliate just over 20,000 members. The socialist society which affiliates the most members is the National Union of Labour and Socialist Clubs with the Fabian Society not far behind. Some socialist societies who affiliate to the Labour Party such as the Fabians report that they do not affiliate their full membership to the Labour Party.

Most socialist societies allow non-Labour Party members to join. Non-Labour Party members who are member of socialist societies can vote in Leadership elections as affiliated supporters in the same way that members of affiliated trade unions can.

We have not discussed with each socialist society who has less than 500 affiliated members whether they have a plan to grow their membership or how big the eligible group is that they would be drawing their membership from. Some socialist societies pay affiliation fees to the Labour Party and some do not.

Many socialist societies report that they feel under-utilised by the Party either because they have skills they wish to offer (e.g. Labour Lawyers) or because they would like to be more involved in the policy making process (i.e. SHA, SEA etc). Often their influence on policy depends of the strength of their relationship with the relevant front bench spokesperson at a given time.

They often bring together members with professional expertise, interest and enthusiasm or members of the same community. They are also often outward looking campaigning organisations contributing to Labour’s internal democracy. They are part of the tradition of

the Labour Party and have made a huge contribution in many ways. Therefore, there is a huge amount of support for them within the Party but also a great deal of concerns raised about their accessibility and how they operate. Most socialist societies are currently run by volunteers. Some more established socialist societies employ staff. Governance issues are raised with Labour Party Head Office staff who are asked to adjudicate on internal issues between different members of an independent socialist society. Affiliated trade unions are heavily regulated by law. Affiliated socialist societies are not and to a large extent run by volunteers.

The huge increase in the membership of the Labour Party has increased the focus and expectations on Socialist Societies. This happens particularly where a Socialist Society is seen to represent a whole group within the Party. The Labour's Women's Network are clear that they do not represent all women in the Party and focus on specific objectives. Where socialist societies are believed to represent a group, frustrations arise when that Socialist Society is not seen as not being accessible to all in that community.

The cost of joining socialist societies varies tremendously. For many working-class Labour Party members, the cost of joining in addition to the cost of Labour Party membership is prohibitive. Many members explained to us that they simply can't afford to join the organisations which they think they should be a member of given their interests. So, for example if you are a disabled lesbian you could have to pay both to be a member of LGBT Labour and Disability to get a voice in those structures.

As well as Socialist Societies there are a significant number of "Friends" Groups which operate in the Labour Party which have not registered as Socialist Societies. Many of these groups have decided not to affiliate so they can operate to a different model and focus on campaigning. Often, they don't have membership fees as they do not wish to deal with the administration relating to that but operate through fundraising and donations. Many Friends groups campaign on single issues such as mental health or with a specific community such as the Somali community and make a huge contribution to the Labour Party.

The Review has met with the Socialist Society Executive, individual socialist societies and "Friends" Groups. We have grappled with the role and responsibilities of Socialist Societies as affiliates and the very different types of organisation which fit into this category. We have considered whether there should be more formal links between the Party and "Friends" Groups and whether there should be formal structures to get their input particularly relating to campaigning. Most "Friends" do not want to have to undertake the administration in being involved as a socialist society and a more informal arrangement probably works.

Some socialist societies are very independent. Others are asking for "support". The membership fees which societies charge also vary hugely. Many socialist societies only operate in some parts of the country and most Labour Party members will not be aware of their existence. Some are not national organisations in the sense that they do not operate and have members in every nation and every region. There is massive potential for many Socialist Societies to be substantially larger in Labour Party if members were given the opportunity to join.

Socialist Societies elect representatives in the Party both on the NEC and on other bodies. The NEC places is elected at Annual Conference by delegates of socialist societies. Many of the Submissions received by the Democracy Review from CLPs, members and from some

unions argue that given the huge expansion in Labour Party membership, it is not appropriate for organisations with such small memberships to be entitled to such positions.

Socialist societies already receive support from the Party with support from a paid Stakeholder Manager, a stall and other support provided at Annual Conference. The support provided both in this way and at regional level varies considerably. For many Socialist Societies the main “pool” they recruit in is Labour Party members so the help provided helps them grow, and to promote their work and ideas.

The Democracy Review has had discussions with the Socialist Society Executive who are keen to address any concerns which have been raised. As they do not have access to the membership lists, to all Labour events and are often run by volunteers help to extend their regional and national reach is something that many Socialist Societies would be very interested in exploring. Many members won't currently be aware of a Socialist Society they might very much want to get involved with. We believe that a programme of measures can be agreed to make Socialist Societies more accessible including on-line. Many are also willing to look at issues of internal democracy.

Recommendations which we make –

We need to look to remove the barriers to joining Socialist Societies and open them up for more members.

That the National Union of Labour and Socialist Clubs which is a federation of clubs should be treated differently.

That where Socialist Societies have policy expertise they should be directly involved in any consultation involving their specialism in our new policy process.

That we should explore a development package with the Socialist Society Executive.

That OMOV ballots of all members in relation to any positions which Socialist Societies hold on the NEC or other bodies within the Party should be explored where the Socialist Society agrees and could form part of criteria for a development package.

That the Labour Party should facilitate OMOV ballots for socialist societies for elections to internal Labour Party Committees.

That in consultation with the Socialist Society Executive we should review the criteria that socialist societies are expected to meet on joining and thereafter.

That we should widely promote Socialist Societies who have agreed to the criteria to help them extend their reach.

Once agreed the criteria should be attached to the Rule Book as an Appendix and available to members on membersnet

Where a socialist society does not meet these criteria that Society should no longer be promoted

That all Socialist Societies should be asked to review their membership fees so that they are not prohibitive. If the NEC believe that a Socialist Society is too expensive it will not be promoted although their affiliation would not be affected.

That an action plan is presented to the NEC of steps which will be taken to promote membership of socialist societies where they have agreed to criteria which would be discussed with the Socialist Societies Executive.

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